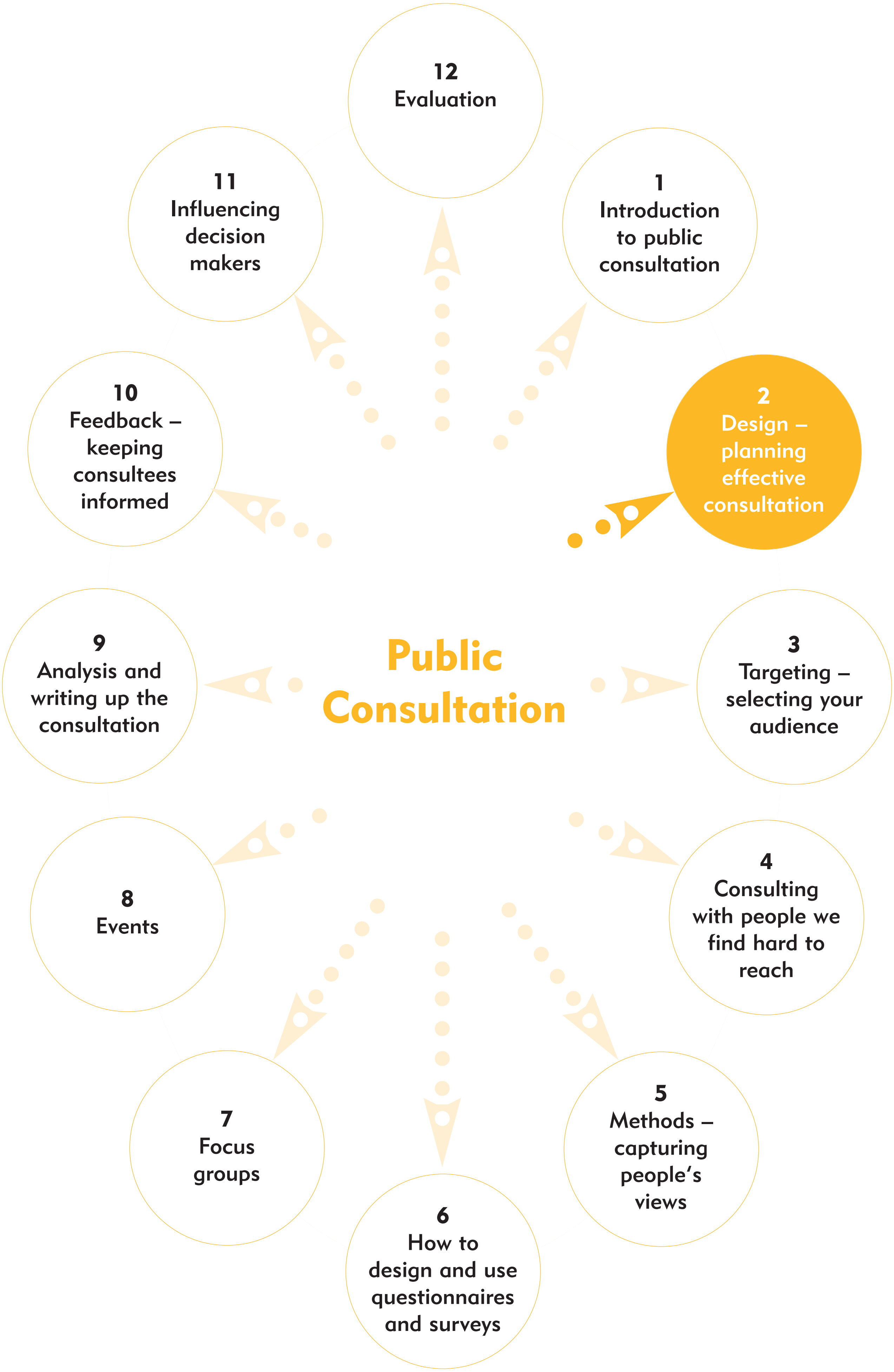
Nottinghamshire County Council

Consultation in Nottinghamshire
Design - planning effective consultation

guide **2**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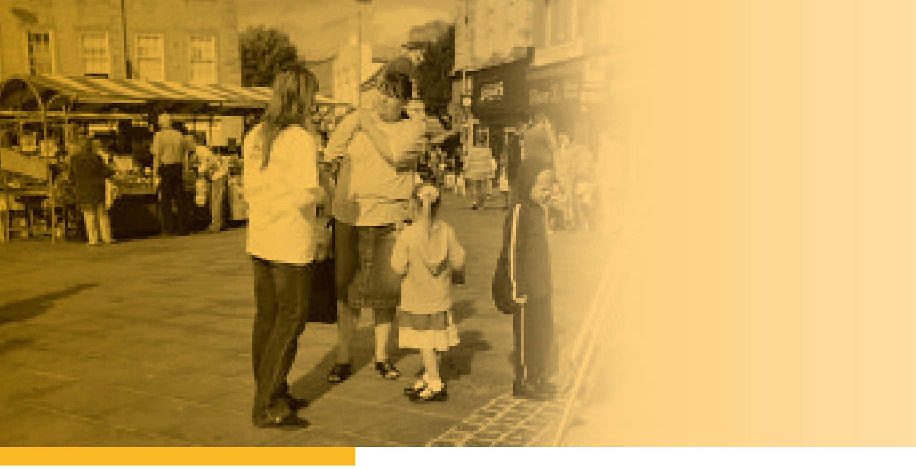

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Introduction

Too often consultation is an afterthought or an exercise that simply fulfils a statutory duty. Our research with stakeholders showed that many feel that decisions about which their views are sought have already been taken. Some thought that the options presented are not those that are really being considered.

The key to getting it right is to be honest about what you want, or expect consultees to contribute, and plan your consultation at an earlier stage.

Purpose

Before starting, examine critically the justification for the exercise.

Focus on these points:

- ➔ Too many consultations can place a burden on over-extended consultees.
- ➔ Lack of co-ordination can lead to duplicated or overlapping exercises.
- ➔ Consultees expect you to act on previous responses before asking them again!
- ➔ Did you provide feedback to consultees last time you consulted them?
- ➔ Has the decision already been taken? Is there really an opportunity for the public or stakeholders to influence the decision?

Scope

Getting the scope of a consultation right avoids complaints from stakeholders and the public and helps us achieve our goals. The problems associated with getting the scope of a consultation wrong are:

Too narrow

- ➔ consultees "boxed in" and feel they're not being properly consulted
- ➔ stakeholders feel unable to outline their contextual views
- ➔ might miss valuable feedback and new ideas.

Too wide

- ➔ may appeal to more stakeholders/consultees
- ➔ more difficult for some stakeholders to respond
- ➔ danger of straying into areas of zero-discretion
- ➔ analysis is a greater challenge
- ➔ harder to influence any particular decision.

Just right

- ➔ sufficient for consultees to feel its breadth
- ➔ not too much for consultors to handle.

Authorising consultation

The Consultation Institute has identified the need to clarify the scope and purpose of a consultation before a decision to consult is taken.

The 'consultation mandate' as they have called it, covers the seven key elements to consider at the very start of any consultation. The mandate should be completed as part of the initial process of deciding whether or not the Council should consult and it should accompany any request for a consultation to be authorised. A copy of each mandate should be sent to your departmental consultation co-ordinator/champion.

The consultation mandate

1. We
   Who is responsible for the consultation?
2. Need to understand the views of
   Who are the audience?
3. About
   What are you asking the audience about?
4. So that
   Who is responsible for taking the decision or an action on the results?
5. Can do
   What is the decision or action to be taken?
6. By
   When does this decision or action have to take place?
7. To achieve
   How does this decision or action help achieve wider project or corporate aims?

A copy of the mandate is included at Appendix 1.

Consultation database

Once a decision has been taken to consult, all consultations should be logged on the consultation database either by your department consultation co-ordinator or yourself. You can enter a consultation by using the online consultation data entry form or the consultation database template which can be found on the consultation toolkit. This template includes the title and aim of the consultation, who is responsible for carrying out the consultation, who is likely to be consulted (and when) and the method(s) used.

A copy of the consultation database template is included at Appendix 2.

Preparing a public engagement plan

Once the consultation mandate has been completed and the consultation entered on the database the detailed planning should begin. It is good practice is to hold pre-consultation meetings with key consultees to help identify issues and preferred approaches. Having held these meetings, a public engagement plan can then be developed.

Managing a major consultation can be a difficult task and the added requirement to consult with key stakeholders before starting can appear daunting. But it does help. Often key stakeholders can help narrow down the list of options or reduce the scope and scale of a consultation. In the long run, pre-consultation helps improve relationships and makes consultation more effective. It may even lead to a better general appreciation of the constraints within which you work.

The purpose of the plan is to help you prepare your consultation in detail and make sure it is a success. The outline provided in Appendix 3 can act as a reminder in planning your consultation. It covers the identification of the audience, and the selection of appropriate methods and techniques.

If your consultation could be contentious it may be worth informing Corporate Communications on 0115 977 3629.

Pre-consultation

If you hold pre-consultation meetings:

1. carefully select who to consult
2. include key stakeholders
3. avoid offering consultees a veto
4. be clear about the questions you are asking
5. be alert to pick up input that may be relevant to others
6. keep a record of what is said and who says what to you.

Timescales

Time for consultation needs to be built into project plans from the start. Identify the date of the decision or activity that consultation can inform. Enter your consultation on the consultation database and draft your public engagement plan.

The Cabinet Office guidelines on best practice in consultation say that a minimum of 12 weeks should be allowed for people to respond in writing to a consultation. 12 weeks will allow the City and district councils, and any voluntary membership organisations, to consult with their own members before forming and reporting their views about the Council's consultation. The public tend to require less time, responding quite quickly once they know about a consultation and have the necessary information to hand. But making sure that all sections of the community have been informed and given an opportunity to respond and allowing for several different methods to be employed can easily take up 12 weeks.

Shorter timescales maybe appropriate if the consultation is:

- ➔ small, straightforward and involves an easily identifiable and contactable audience
- ➔ affects a particular locality
- ➔ can be undertaken face-to-face.

You should seek advice from your departmental consultation co-ordinator or the Customer Management Team if you think your consultation could be 'fast-tracked'.

In all cases however, the consultation timetable will have to allow sufficient time to prepare, approve and produce consultation materials in advance of the consultation period and to analyse and report the results at the end. It should also allow additional time to feedback the results to those who have taken part and others who may be affected or interested.

A typical timeline for a major consultation would allow:

- ➔ preparation and approval of consultation materials: 6-8 weeks
- ➔ production and distribution: 2-3 weeks
- ➔ consultation: 12 weeks
- ➔ analysis of results: 2-3 weeks
- ➔ reports and decision: 6-8 weeks
- ➔ feedback to consultees: 4-6 weeks

A major consultation would therefore take more than six months, which is why it is vital to make sure adequate provision is made in the project timetable. A smaller consultation would take less time, but experience suggests that we typically allow too little time for people to have their say before a decision is made.

If having looked at the time likely to be involved, you think not enough time is included in the project timetable, there are three options:

1. delay the decision
2. reduce the scale of any consultation
3. don't consult.

Report any conflicts to your departmental consultation co-ordinator or the Customer Management Team.

Appendix 1
Our consultation mandate*

We,	1	need to understand the	**1 Identity**
views of	2 ☐ .... ☐ .... ☐ .... ☐ .... ☐ .... ☐		**2 Target**
concerning	3		**3 Issue**
so that	4		**4 Actor**
can	5		**5 Action**
on/by	6		**6 Date**
so as to accomplish	6		**7 Wider Aim**

* *Source: This is based on the Consultation Institute's consultation mandate.*

Appendix 2

Nottinghamshire's consultation database template

All consultations must be logged on the Council's consultation database. Please complete the form below and return to your departmental co-ordinator.

1	Project title		
2	Project aims/objectives		
3	Organisation and Department		
4	Who will conduct this project?	External agency (name) Other	
5	Contact	Name Tel no Email	
6	Status		Proposed / Current / Completed *(please delete as appropriate)*
7	Start and end dates		
8	Budget for consultation exercise		£
9	Partners (if any)		
10	Method of consultation:	Face to face Telephone Written Online	
11	Target communities and groups disabled / male / female / ethnic group residents / all adults / carers / other		
12	Consultation language i.e. English / Punjabi / Chinese / British sign / Urdu/ other language		
13	Has a Service Diversity Review form been completed?		Yes / No *(delete as appropriate)*
14	Approx numbers to be consulted		
15	Geographical area covered i.e. all of Nottinghamshire County / Nottingham City / Beeston South / Rushcliffe / Bassetlaw / other		

Name of person completing this form: ____________________

Telephone number: ____________________

If you would like advice on completing this form please contact your departmental co-ordinator or the Customer Management Team on 0115 9772937

Appendix 3
Outline of a public engagement plan

1 **Consultor**

2 **Background (including consultation mandate)**

3 **Target audience**

- Who (individuals/organizations)
- Statutory bodies/public utilities
- Service users/non-users
- Staff
- Where (locality-based/area boundary).

4 **Overall message**

'There is an exciting proposal to do X, we want to hear your views so that any such proposal best meets the needs of Y.'

5 **Selection of consultation methods**

What methods where chosen and why

- Face to face
- Print
- New technology.

You may wish to consider

- Costs
- Coverage
- Information to be provided
- Involvement
- Controllability
- Ease of use
- Speed of delivery.

6 **Tactics**

- How will you ensure hard to reach groups can participate?
- Will the consultation be rolled out by audience or area or launched in a single burst
- Offers or incentives to encourage responses.

7 **Techniques**

- Response mechanisms - can you offer a variety of ways for consultees to respond?
- Participation and involvement e.g. through pre-meetings, forums, public meetings, on-line discussion
- Feedback - how will you inform consultees of the outcome and demonstrate the influence their involvement has had on the decisions taken.

8 **Budget and resources**

9 **Timetable**
– include key milestones and decision date

10 **Evaluation and contingencies**

How will you know the consultation is a success...

- Levels of awareness among consultees
- Number of responses received
- Quality of responses achieved
- Degree of influence achieved
- Satisfaction with final decision.

How and when will you check

- Methods
- Timings
- Contingencies.

Notes

Nottinghamshire County Council's consultation standards

1. A consultation mandate should be completed and approved by your departmental co-ordinator/ champion before the start of any consultation. *(Guides 2 and 11)*
2. The consultation should be logged on the County Council's consultation database. *(Guides 2, 10 and 11)*
3. For key decisions a public engagement plan should be published with the forward plan. *(Guides 2 and 11)*
4. In planning a consultation, the specific communication needs of groups and individuals who are often otherwise excluded should be considered. *(Guides 3 and 4)*
5. A minimum of 12 weeks should be allowed for consultation on major decisions. *(Guide 2)*
6. The name, address and contact number of the person responsible for the consultation should be published on all consultation materials. *(Guides 2 and 10)*
7. The consultation material should make clear by what date responses are required, in what format and to whom they should be sent. *(Guides 2 and 6)*
8. The consultation should include a face-to-face element where consultees are able to meet, question and put their views to the decision-maker(s). *(Guides 4, 5, 7 and 8)*
9. Any venue selected for a consultation event should meet the Council's accessibility code. *(Guides 4 and 8)*
10. Any complaints about the consultation, questions asked, materials or time allowed should be noted in the consultation report. *(Guides 9, 10 and 11)*
11. A notice of decision should be published for each consultation. *(Guides 10 and 11)*
12. Feedback regarding the responses, the Council's decision and how the consultation influenced it should be given to consultees. *(Guides 4, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12)*

Contacting us

email **consultation@nottscc.gov.uk**
phone **0115 977 2937**
fax **0115 977 3886**
post **Chief Executive's Department, County Hall, West Bridgford, Nottingham NG2 7QP**
internet **www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk**

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